

Evidence for Survival of Consciousness in Near-Death Experiences: Decades of Science and New Insights

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Introduction

Virtually everyone has wondered if there is an afterlife. This is understandable, given the appropriate concerns about the mortality of ourselves, our loved ones, and all of humanity. The question of an afterlife has been discussed and debated for millennia. As a physician practicing the medical specialty of radiation oncology, which is the use of radiation therapy to treat cancer, I have been intrigued by issues of our mortality. The question of what happens after bodily death is regularly present in my daily medical practice as I work with patients that have a life-threatening diagnosis of cancer. Prior investigations of near-death experience (NDE) combined with the research that I am presenting in this article have convinced me, based on evidence, that our consciousness survives bodily death.

Evidence for the reality of an afterlife is available from multiple lines of scholarly study. Perhaps the most substantial evidence for the reality of an afterlife comes from near-death experiences (NDEs). It makes sense both scientifically and logically to investigate the experiences of those who died or had a seriously close brush with death regarding their possible insights into the survival of consciousness after death. NDE, and its consistent message of an afterlife, is the focus of this article.

Scholarly research regarding near-death experiences has been published for over 45 years. NDE first became widely known in 1975 with the publication of Dr. Raymond Moody's book *Life After Life*.¹ As early as 2005 it was estimated that "*At least 55 researchers or research teams in North America, Europe, Australia, and Asia published at least 65 research studies involving nearly 3500 NDErs, addressing the experience, its aftereffects, or both.*"²

Up to the current time, near-death experiences have been the subject of hundreds of publications in peer-reviewed scholarly journals. Many of these studies were published in the world's leading medical and scientific journals. This article will reference select previously published NDE research to help present the current state-of-the-art understanding of NDE as evidence of an afterlife. In addition, I will present new and previously unpublished research to advance knowledge about NDE and its important implications for the survival of consciousness after bodily death. Much of the unpublished research presented in this article updates or expands my previously published investigations. This new and previously unpublished research helps assure that this article offers the most current and state-of-the-art insights into the NDE evidence of an afterlife.

For this article, the term *near-death experience* will refer to lucid, organized experiences occurring at the time of a life-threatening event so severe that there is unconsciousness or clinically apparent death with an absent heartbeat. This is a relatively rigorous concept of NDE, but appropriate to distinguish NDEs from non-NDEs.³ This concept of NDE is entirely consistent with the definition of near-death experience from Webster's dictionary:

*An occurrence in which a person comes very close to dying and has memories of a spiritual experience (such as meeting dead friends and family members or seeing a white light) during the time when death was near.*⁴

By the very dictionary definition of *unconscious*, it should not be possible to have a lucid and organized memory while unconscious.⁵ And yet, thousands of near-death experiencers (NDErs) report NDEs with characteristic *elements*, which is what occurs during the NDEs. While no two NDEs are the same, my prior research found 12 elements that may occur during NDEs.⁶ When these elements are present in NDEs, they usually happen in consistent and logical order. These NDE elements are consistently observed in NDEs worldwide, in all age groups, and regardless of their belief systems. The consistent and ordered presence of the elements in NDEs helps us to be confident of the reality of NDEs.

The 12 elements of near-death experiences are:⁷

1. An out-of-body experience (OBE).
2. Heightened senses.
3. Intense and generally positive emotions or feelings.
4. Passing into or through a tunnel.
5. Encountering a mystical or brilliant light.
6. Encountering deceased relatives/friends or mystical beings.
7. A sense of alteration in time or space.
8. A life review.
9. Encountering otherworldly (heavenly) realms.
10. Encountering or learning special knowledge.
11. Encountering a boundary or barrier.
12. A voluntary or involuntary return to the body.

Near-death experiences are not rare. Surveys in the United States, Germany, and Australia estimated that about 4 to 15% of the population previously had NDEs.^{8,9,10} Thus thousands of NDEs have been available for research in the past, and thousands of NDEs should be available for future investigations. Studying large numbers of NDEs gives us greater confidence in the results of the studies than would be possible from investigating small numbers of NDEs or only anecdotal reports.

I began investigating near-death experiences in 1998 with the establishment of the Near-Death Experience Research Foundation (NDERF). NDERF started with a

website devoted to NDE, www.nderf.org. From its inception the NDERF website had a detailed questionnaire that included a request for the complete NDE narrative. The current version of the NDERF questionnaire asks over 100 questions. In the greater than 20 years that NDERF has been active, we received over 3500 NDEs. This combination of the availability of thousands of NDEs and the results from detailed surveys allowed the most extensive investigation of NDEs ever reported.

The current version of the NDERF survey was closed for accrual after receiving 834 sequentially shared NDEs. The immediately prior version of the NDERF survey included 1122 sequentially shared NDEs. These NDERF studies are the most extensive scientific investigations of NDEs ever reported.

The two most recent versions of the NDERF surveys included the NDE Scale questions.¹¹ The NDE Scale asks sixteen questions about the content of the near-death experience. This Scale is the most validated research method to help distinguish NDEs from experiences that are not NDEs. A Scale score of 7 or higher is required to classify experiences as NDEs. Throughout this article, the NDErs whose survey results I am presenting all had NDE Scale scores of 7 or above. This further validates these experiences as actual NDEs. All experiences included in the NDERF studies also had clearly documented life-threatening events at the time of their NDEs. For inclusion in the NDERF studies presented in this article, unless otherwise stated, all NDEs were single NDE accounts, shared in English, and were shared by the individual who personally had the NDE.¹²

In all NDERF studies, experiences were classified as near-death experiences only if there was a lucid experience at the time of a close brush with death. Experiences in the NDERF studies are unbiased NDE accounts. No NDEs were excluded from the NDERF studies solely because of any particular content. The full text of the NDE narratives is posted to the NDERF website, excluding comments that would identify the NDErs, are significantly disparaging toward identifiable individuals, or contain inappropriate comments such as advocating illicit substance use. The NDEs posted on the NDERF website are edited to correct obvious spelling and grammar errors. NDEs quoted in this article from the NDERF website may be paraphrased for clarity. As remarkable as the NDE quotes are in this article, please remember that they accurately represent the real experiences of NDErs from all walks of life and around the world.

The NDERF surveys are internet-based. The internet has been utilized for scholarly surveys for decades. Many published studies directly compared the reliability of internet surveys with “pencil-and-paper” surveys concluding that they are comparable in reliability.^{13,14,15,16,17,18} This important concept is discussed further on the NDERF website.¹⁹

The reliability of the NDERF survey is enhanced by using the tried-and-true scientific method of redundancy. This involves asking several questions addressing the same concept in different areas of the survey with slightly different wording. I am

impressed at the consistency in responses to the redundant NDERF survey questions. The time required to complete the greater than 100 questions on the NDERF survey is a strong disincentive for anyone to complete the survey fraudulently.

Another important method of validating the near-death experiences posted on NDERF comes from the large volume of visitors to the NDERF website. There are currently well over 50,000 unique visitors to the website each month. This allows an enormous number of people to read the posted NDEs and let us know of any concerns regarding possible plagiarized or falsified NDEs. Over the decades of NDERF's existence it has been gratifying that far less than 1% of NDEs submitted to the NDERF website survey are plagiarized or otherwise falsified. My background as a physician also helps verify the validity of the described medical circumstances of the life-threatening events leading to the NDEs. Finally, it is notable that the NDEs published on NDERF are consistent in content with NDEs in published articles, books, and other reliable internet collections of NDEs. Further details regarding the methodology of the NDERF studies are available on the NDERF website.²⁰

My research into near-death experiences was first published in detail in the New York Times bestselling book *Evidence of the Afterlife: The Science of Near-Death Experiences* in 2010. There was intense media interest following the publication of this book. This provided the opportunity to share my NDE research with millions of people on shows including the NBC Today Show, The Dr. Oz Show, National Geographic television, History Channel, The O'Reilly Factor, and on television broadcasts around the world.

This article presents extensive new research from the NDERF surveys. A vitally important point about this new research is its *transparency*. About 98% of near-death experiencers who shared with NDERF authorized the full text of their NDEs to be posted on the NDERF website. As a result, the original source of virtually all the NDE research discussed in this article is available for review by anyone with internet access.

When near-death experiences from the NDERF website are quoted throughout this article, there are references to the full text of the NDEs posted on the NDERF website. This is an essential and unique cornerstone of the transparency evident throughout this article.

As a further commitment to transparency, the NDERF website hosts a custom-designed search engine: www.nderf.org/nderfexplorer/nderf_explorer.html. This search engine rapidly finds NDEs on the NDERF website with user-defined custom search terms. This allows anyone to personally investigate specific types of NDEs or content within NDEs quickly. The over 3500 NDEs posted on www.nderf.org and the search engine let anyone *see for themselves* the remarkably consistent content of NDEs and their messages of survival of consciousness after bodily death. We are now more confident than ever about the reality of NDEs from prior published reports *and* the

exceptional consistency in *thousands* of NDEs that are publicly accessible on the NDERF website.

This article presents twelve lines of evidence for the reality of near-death experience and their consistent indication of an afterlife. All twelve lines of evidence have additional supplementary material posted on www.nderf.org. Supplementary material is referenced in endnotes throughout this article. Interested readers are encouraged to explore the extensive examples from NDEs contained in the additional material. This supplemental material develops the twelve lines of evidence more convincingly than would be possible in this article alone. The supplementary material helps us to be more confident than ever that the evidence for the reality of NDEs derives not just from a limited number of examples, but from the exceptionally consistent content seen in *enormous* numbers of NDEs.

Any one of the lines of evidence presented in this article would be convincing to many. The combination of *all twelve* lines of evidence converges to the understanding that NDEs and their consistent messages of an afterlife are *real*.

The Medically Inexplicable Consciousness of Near-Death Experiences

Near-death experiences, by their very definition, occur at a time of unconsciousness and even clinical death with an absent heartbeat. Speaking both medically and logically, having a highly lucid experience while unconscious or clinically dead should be impossible. However, thousands of NDEs describe lucid conscious perceptions even while comatose.

Near-death experiences often occur in association with a cardiac arrest, which means the heart stops beating.²¹ This condition is popularly known by the phrase “heart attack”. To understand how remarkable it is to have an NDE at a time of clinical death, it is essential to know what happens when the heart stops beating. After the heart stops, blood immediately ceases flowing to the brain. About ten to twenty seconds later, the electroencephalogram (EEG), a measurement of brain electrical activity, is flat.²² At this time there is no significant measurable electrical activity in the cortex, which is the outer part of the brain. Multiple studies show that patients are usually amnesic or confused about events that took place before or after the cardiac arrest.^{23,24,25}

Consequently, almost immediately after cardiac arrest, it should be impossible to have a lucid, organized, and conscious experience. But when a near-death experience occurs, a lucid experience happens even while physical brain function is shut down. The NDERF website has hundreds of examples of NDEs that happened during a cardiac arrest.²⁶ The typical high lucidity in NDEs following cardiac arrest defies any possible medical explanation. Here are two examples of NDEs that occurred at the time of a cardiac arrest:

Joan had a spinal anesthetic for surgery on her ankle. There were complications, and she coded, which means her heart stopped. Joan describes her near-death experience:

I went from being in my body to being in a place of absolute love. I can only describe it like being in a swimming pool, but even my body was filled with this loving. I was one with this place, but also apart from it. I was still me, but I was far more than me. I was one with everything - and it was ALL good. I did hear beautiful music, but it wasn't like our music. The music itself was part of me, but I don't think I was singing. It was more like it was just part of me, and I was part of it, but it was much more than just me. I felt weightless and free - absolutely free. I was enfolded in this loving and was part of it too. There was not one single part of me or part of anything else that was not love. Individuals did not exist in the same way as we do here. I was still me, but I was also part of the loving. I KNEW things without hearing a single spoken word. I WAS love. I KNEW that all religions had it wrong. There is no way rules and judgment could flow from this place. Earthly religions made it complicated when it was very easy. There is only love, and all of us are part of it. There is NO way that we cannot be loved. We ARE love. Time did not exist. I have always loved my family on earth, but I did not miss them. I did not think of them. I was more joyful than I ever have been. I felt utterly connected to everything and everyone. We ARE inter-connected as one. There is no such thing as 'death'. This experience has changed me.²⁷

Another example of a near-death experience occurring at the time of a cardiac arrest is from Yazmine. Her heart stopped for six minutes. She received cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), which brought her back to life. After recovering, she shared her remarkable NDE:

Then suddenly I was above my body, which was lying on a stretcher bed and wearing a white hospital gown. I looked at my body and knew it wasn't the real me. It was the thing I had been caught inside. Now I was free! I felt such happiness! The joy was all-pervading. We like to get knotted up about the real-world pain, suffering, and loss, but they are all illusory experiences.

Everything became clear to me. The nurses were calling my name. One nurse was crying, and another was saying, "Oh my God, we've lost her!" I was above them thinking how silly it was that they were making all that fuss. I wondered why they couldn't see me. I just knew that all was perfectly fabulous! Then I saw an open window about 6 inches wide. I thought, "Wow, I wonder if I can fit through there?" Then instantly I was in another state.²⁸

Near-death experiencers are unconscious, comatose, or clinically dead. However, the lucidity they experience is usually a state of supernormal consciousness. The most recent NDERF survey asked 834 NDErs, "How did your highest level of consciousness and alertness during the experience compare to your normal everyday consciousness and alertness?" Here are the responses:

n=834	NDErs	%
More consciousness and alertness than normal	654	78.4
Normal consciousness and alertness	142	17.0
Less consciousness and alertness than normal	38	4.6

These survey results vividly demonstrate that during near-death experiences consciousness can exist while unconscious or clinically dead. It is extraordinary that nearly 80% of NDErs report *greater* consciousness during NDEs than ordinary awake consciousness. NDEs consistently demonstrate that consciousness can continue even when the physical brain is shut down.

The most recent NDERF survey also asks, "If your highest level of consciousness and alertness during the experience was different from your normal everyday consciousness and alertness, please explain." In response to this question, NDErs described the remarkable state of consciousness during their NDEs:

Because that highest level of consciousness was not constrained to the physical plane of my everyday life, there were more dimensions and less boundaries.²⁹

It was a completely different way for my brain to process things. I thought of many different things at once and was able to comprehend them instantly. My consciousness was unconstrained by anything physical. There was infinite thought and wisdom.³⁰

It was a completely new consciousness. I felt like I was experiencing things not just through my earthly senses but also through other, perhaps new, senses that I wasn't aware of daily. I felt like my eyes were WIDE open. I could see everything, and it was so fascinating! I was very aware of each detail.³¹

It was so clear and nothing I had ever felt before.³²

I felt that I was thinking with more than my brain. I WAS total and pure consciousness, knowingness, and BEingness of everlasting life!³³

It felt more real than ordinary life. Life seems like a fog when compared to it.³⁴

These comments dramatically illustrate that consciousness during near-death experiences can far exceed ordinary earthly consciousness. This accelerated consciousness is further demonstrated when NDErs review part, or even all, of their prior lives during their NDEs. This is called the *life review* and will be discussed in more detail later. Here is what several NDErs said about their level of consciousness and alertness during their life reviews:

I am still astounded by my life review. It was exceptionally different from my everyday consciousness. On this earth plane, seeing an entire lifetime going by simultaneously is virtually impossible. Yet, I could comprehend as if I were living it all over again.³⁵

*My mind understood incredibly fast. I worked it out that over 378 million seconds were compressed to just a few seconds in the life review, which included moral lessons. That's like superluminal light speed. I am aware it sounds impossible.*³⁶

The “378 million seconds” stated above works out to 12 years old, which was his age at the time of his near-death experience. This is evidence that consciousness not only survives bodily death, but can be accelerated beyond anything we could possibly experience in our everyday life.

Prior studies consistently described enhanced mental functioning during near-death experiences.³⁷ Leading NDE researcher Bruce Greyson, MD found similar increased consciousness and lucidity in NDEs as the NDERF study:

*Near-death experiencers often describe their mental processes during the NDE as remarkably clear and lucid and their sensory experiences as unusually vivid, surpassing those of their normal waking state. An analysis of 520 cases in our collection showed that 80 percent of experiencers described their thinking during the NDE as “clearer than usual” or “as clear as usual.” Furthermore, in our collection, people reported enhanced mental functioning significantly more often when they were actually physiologically close to death than when they were not.*³⁸

Vivid and highly lucid near-death experiences at the time of clinical death are among the best evidence for the survival of consciousness following bodily death. This is especially true given that supernormal accelerated consciousness is common during NDEs. The medically inexplicable consciousness of NDEs during cardiac arrest provides clear and robust evidence that consciousness survives bodily death.

Out-Of-Body Awareness During Near-Death Experiences

At the time of a near-death experience, one of the first and most common elements to occur is the out-of-body experience (OBE). An OBE is defined as “the separation of consciousness from the physical body.” When using the term OBE in this article, we will be referring only to OBEs occurring during NDEs. While NDErs are unconscious or clinically dead, their consciousness separates from their body. Their point of conscious perspective usually rises above their body. From this viewpoint, they may see and hear ongoing earthly events that may include the frantic efforts of medical personnel trying to resuscitate them. It is uncommon that consciousness during NDEs moves beside the physical body and only rarely goes below the body. About half of NDErs describe OBEs with awareness of ongoing earthly events.

Most people have not had an OBE. This makes it difficult for many people to accept that OBEs are possible. However, this section will provide incontrovertible evidence that OBEs do occur during near-death experiences with accurate and verified OBE observations.

Susan's near-death experience is an example of an OBE. Her heart stopped from a severe allergic reaction to an intravenous injection of contrast for a medical scan. Severe reactions like what Susan experienced are fortunately extremely rare. Susan's OBE observations during her NDE were later verified:

I was getting a CT scan as a diagnostic test for stomach problems. After I was injected with the contrast dye, I started sneezing uncontrollably. The scans were performed, and the nurse informed me that it was time for me to leave. At this point I couldn't speak or breathe. I then passed out, and the nurse frantically called for the code blue team. By the time the code blue team arrived, I guess I was 'dead.' I saw the team enter and surround a person; at least that's what I thought at the time. It never dawned on me that the other person was me. I was very calm but felt terrible for the lady (me) as the code blue team struggled to get her heart started. I saw 'me' being intubated and chest compressions as they tried to revive me. I saw my catheterization and everything else around me. Forty-five minutes later my heart started to beat on its own. I was pulled back into my own body. I saw everything and related this to the code blue team later, and they verified that what I saw really happened. I saw everything that happened in detail during my death. Every member of the code blue team confirmed this later.³⁹

One of the earliest studies of the accuracy of OBE observations during near-death experiences was by cardiologist Michael Sabom, MD.⁴⁰ Most NDErs in his study underwent cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR). His study included thirty-two NDErs who had OBEs during their NDEs. The study comparison group was twenty-five "seasoned cardiac patients" who did not have NDEs at the time of their close brush with death. Dr. Sabom asked the patients in both groups to describe their own resuscitations. This study concluded that the NDErs with OBEs were *far* more accurate than those in the control group in describing their resuscitations. The findings of Sabom's study were consistent with the NDErs' generally firm belief that what they observed in their OBEs really happened, including witnessing their own CPR.

Penny Sartori, PhD, published another study with methodology similar to Dr. Sabom's study.⁴¹ In her interview of fifteen near-death experiencers, eight of them described OBEs. She also asked the NDErs who had OBEs to describe their own resuscitations. The study comparison group were patients who underwent resuscitation without associated OBEs. Sartori's study found several NDErs who were remarkably accurate in describing what they saw during their OBEs. The comparison group that did not have OBEs was highly inaccurate and often could only guess at what occurred during their resuscitations. Sartori's study provides further evidence that those having NDEs after their hearts stop can have remarkably accurate OBE observations.

It is a medical fact that a highly lucid NDE-like consciousness during CPR resuscitation without an associated NDE should not be possible.⁴²

Janice Holden, PhD, conducted another significant study of OBEs during near-death experiences.⁴³ Holden reviewed all NDEs with OBEs previously published in all

scholarly articles and books. This investigation included only NDEs where the NDErs or others sought to verify the accuracy of their OBE observations. Eighty-nine NDE reports contained observations of earthly, everyday events. Fourteen additional NDE reports described observations of “nonmaterial, nonphysical phenomena” that could later be verified. There were four NDEs in the study reporting both types of observations. The study had stringent criteria for defining the reality of the OBE observations. If any detail whatsoever in the OBE observations was inaccurate, then the overall OBE observation was scored as “inaccurate.” Even with such strict criteria, 92 percent of the NDErs’ descriptions of OBEs seemed totally accurate and without any error, as verified by investigations following the NDEs. This study’s findings are substantial evidence for the reality of OBE observations during NDEs.

I previously published a study of the accuracy of OBE observations during near-death experiences.^{44,45} This investigation reviewed 617 NDEs that were sequentially shared on the NDERF website survey. Of the 617 NDEs, 287 NDEs included OBE accounts with enough information to determine the reality of their observations objectively. A review of these 287 OBEs found 280 (97.6%) that described ongoing earthly events during their NDEs with entirely realistic observations, and lacking any content that seemed unreal. From this study group of 287 OBEs, 65 NDErs personally investigated their OBE observation accuracy after recovering from their close brush with death. None of these 65 out-of-body experiencers (OBErs) found any inaccuracy in what they observed during their NDEs. Notably, many verified OBE observations were far from their bodies and beyond any possible physical sensory awareness.

This remarkably high percentage of accurate OBE observations during near-death experiences cannot be explained by physical brain function. Further corroboration comes from many other published reports of NDEs with verified OBEs far from the physical body.⁴⁶

Many published near-death experience accounts reported OBEs with accurate observations of events that were completely unexpected by the NDErs, which provides more strong evidence that NDEs are actual observations by a consciousness apart from the body.⁴⁷ An example of an unanticipated OBE observation during an NDE comes from Kate. She was under general anesthesia to repair bowel that became paralyzed after a hysterectomy:

I was on the ceiling looking down at the surgery taking place. I was not distressed. The surgeon asked for an instrument. He got the wrong one, so he threw it on the floor. Then I went down a long tunnel that became increasingly bright. I could hear unbelievable music, and ever since, I have loved music. I came out into a bright place with flowers, trees, and a stream that had a bridge over it. The bridge appeared to be made of intertwined tree trunks. At the other side of the bridge was grandma. Next to her was another woman with brilliant blue eyes, a dark mole near her mouth, and an indented chin. I had never seen the other woman before. When I stepped onto the

bridge, grandma told me to go back, as it was not my time. She said that I would eventually come there. Then I felt sad as I desperately wanted to be with her. She had always been there for me when I was a child. Then I felt a huge “whoosh.” The next thing I knew was that I had returned to consciousness. My mother, whom I was never close to, was crying by my bed. She said, 'We nearly lost you. You have been very sick and unconscious for several days.' I said, 'I want to tell you something.' She said, 'No, just rest.' I insisted and told her about this experience. She did not believe me until I came to the bridge part. My grandma was her mother. I described the lady with my grandma, and my mother said that she was her grandma who died long before I was born. When the surgeon came to see me, he told me how sick I had been and how I had died on the table. I told him that I was watching and saw him throw the instrument on the floor. Then I told him the story, and he asked who I had been talking with. I said, 'No one'... The surgeon confirmed that I died during surgery.⁴⁸

Kate certainly did not expect to see the surgeon throw an instrument on the floor. She also would not have expected to see her deceased great-grandmother who died long before she was born.

Several investigators prospectively studied the accuracy of OBEs during near-death experiences. These studies usually involved placing targets that might be seen during OBEs in critical care areas of a hospital where an NDE might occur.^{49,50,51,52,53,54} These targets were usually placed in locations not visible to the patients or the hospital staff. Very few NDEs occurred during these studies, and even fewer OBEs were reported. None of the NDErs in these studies had OBEs with their visual perception directed toward the target. These studies could neither confirm nor refute the reality of OBE observations during NDEs. It is important to continue prospective NDE investigations with this methodology to help understand the special consciousness consistently described in NDEs.

Skeptics argue that when near-death experiencers and others confirm OBE observations as accurate, they are just lucky guesses. This skeptic argument is refuted by the consistent accuracy of OBE observations found in multiple large studies. These prior studies included hundreds of entirely realistic OBE observations, with many dozens of OBEs later verified as accurate by the NDErs themselves or others. Additionally, the vast number of case reports with accurate OBE observations, both previously published and posted on the NDERF website, refute the skeptics. This is further illustrated in over a dozen examples of NDEs with verified OBE observations in supplemental material on the NDERF website.⁵⁵ It is relatively rare for NDERF to receive an NDE account with an OBE observation that was either unrealistic or later verified as not having occurred.

Another popular skeptical “explanation” of near-death experiences is that NDEs are only false memories occurring as NDErs enter or exit unconsciousness from their life-threatening event. This skeptic argument fails to consider that during NDEs the maximal level of consciousness and alertness is generally not before or after

unconsciousness. During NDEs, maximal consciousness and alertness is typically when the body is unconscious. An NDERF survey question asks, “At what time during the experience were you at your highest level of consciousness and alertness?” In reviewing hundreds of narrative responses to this question, NDErs typically state that their highest level of consciousness and alertness is not at the beginning or end of their NDE, but somewhere during the NDE or throughout the entire NDE. It is very uncommon for NDErs to state that their highest level of consciousness and alertness was when they were entering into or recovering from unconsciousness. This is further strong evidence that OBEs occur *during* NDEs, and are not simply false memories.

To emphasize how remarkable these accurate OBE observations are, I issued this challenge in my book *Evidence of the Afterlife: The Science of Near-Death Experiences*:

Are you still a doubter? Try this experiment: Close your eyes for five minutes in a public place, staying as aware as possible of ongoing events during this time. Have another person there with you who is seeing and hearing events. At the end of five minutes, compare your impressions of the five minutes with the person accompanying you. Even though you were fully alert and trying to be aware of ongoing events, I can guess that your impressions will contain significant inaccuracies—far more than those found in the out-of-body experiences of the subjects in the NDERF study.⁵⁶

Near-death experiencers almost always believe that their consciousness separated from their bodies, and their OBE observations were authentic. With hundreds of accurate OBE observations, we now have substantial evidence from NDEs that consciousness occurs apart from the physical body even when the body is unconscious or clinically dead. OBE observations far from the physical body during near-death experiences are as accurate as the more common OBE observations close to the body. This evidence from NDEs points directly to the conclusion that our consciousness continues after bodily death, and an afterlife is a reality.

Supernormal Sensory Awareness in Near-Death Experiences

Supernormal sensory awareness is consistently described in near-death experiences. This is further evidence that consciousness in NDEs occurs separately from the physical brain, as would be expected if consciousness survives bodily death.

An excellent example of supernormal sensory awareness in near-death experiences is visual NDEs in the blind. Blind NDErs have reported normal and even supernormal vision. In 1998 Kenneth Ring, PhD, and Sharon Cooper, MA, published an important article in the *Journal of Near-Death Studies*.⁵⁷ Their investigation found that visually impaired or blind people often described normal or supernormal vision during

their NDEs. Several especially significant case reports described individuals born completely blind who had typical NDEs that included detailed vision.

The best documented case of a near-death experience in a person born totally blind was the account of Vicki.⁵⁸ To Vicki, vision was unknown and unknowable. Vicki had two NDEs. Her first NDE was at age 12 due to appendicitis. Her second and more detailed NDE was at age 22 due to a car accident with head injuries so severe that she was still recovering a year later. In Vicki's own words, she describes vision during her NDE:

I knew it was me... I was pretty thin then. I was quite tall and thin at that point. And I recognized at first that it was a body, but I didn't even know that it was mine initially. Then I perceived that I was up on the ceiling, and I thought, "Well, that's kind of weird. What am I doing up here?" I thought, "Well, this must be me. Am I dead?"...I just briefly saw this body, and ...I knew that it was mine because I wasn't in mine.⁵⁹

Here is a sample of her detailed visual observations that occurred throughout her near-death experience:

I think I was wearing the plain gold band on my right ring finger and my father's wedding ring next to it. But my wedding ring I definitely saw.... That was the one I noticed the most because it's unusual. It has orange blossoms on the corners of it.⁶⁰

Vicki emphasizes the uniqueness of the vision she had during her near-death experiences, noting:

This was, she said, the only time I could ever relate to seeing and to what light was, because I experienced it.⁶¹

I personally interviewed Vicki. There is no possible medical explanation for someone born totally blind to have a near-death experience with such vivid and detailed vision.

Another example of supernormal vision in near-death experiences is the frequent description of 360-degree vision during their NDEs. When NDErs use the term *360 degrees* to describe what they see during their NDEs, they generally mean true *spherical* vision. Thus, NDErs are experiencing visual awareness simultaneously in all directions - forward, backward, right, left, above, and below. Two illustrative examples from the NDERF archives are:

Vision is very different and hard to describe. I feel it is more of a perception. At one point I was able to see and perceive 360 degrees.⁶²

Clear, more colorful, 360 view with zoom action.⁶³

All five senses in our earthly life (seeing, hearing, touch, taste, and smell) are reported in near-death experiences. NDErs often describe enhanced function of these five senses, which is remarkable because they are unconscious or clinically dead during

their NDEs. Of all these senses, vision is most often described as substantially different from normal vision during NDEs.⁶⁴

A previously published NDERF study of vision in near-death experiences is by far the most extensive study of its type ever conducted.^{65,66} The prior version of the NDERF survey asked 1122 NDErs, “Did your vision differ in any way from your normal, everyday vision (in any aspect, such as clarity, field of vision, colors, brightness, depth perception, degree of solidness/transparency of objects, etc.)?” Here are the results:

n=1122	NDErs	%
Yes	722	64.3
Uncertain	182	16.2
No	218	19.4

Near-death experiencers, in their own words, discussed their supernormal vision:

*Everything became more vivid in color and brightness.*⁶⁷

*Having no material body, I was sensing, seeing, feeling, on another plane. It is like trying to explain the colors of the rainbow to a blind person.*⁶⁸

*I had extreme clarity and crispness to my vision during the experience. This is interesting because while I was in the coma a piece of the infection broke off from the heart valve permanently blinding me in my left eye. Before the experience I had perfect vision, since the experience I am legally blind in the left eye.*⁶⁹

The most recent version of the NDERF survey question asks, “Please compare your vision during the experience to your everyday vision that you had immediately prior to the time of the experience.” Responses to this question were in narrative format. Many near-death experiencers described supernormal vision. The common occurrence of supernormal vision during NDEs is vividly demonstrated in the hundreds of narrative responses to this question available on the NDERF website as supplemental material.⁷⁰ Several NDErs responding to this survey question were legally blind at the time of their NDEs, yet had clear vision:

*I could see clearly without glasses. I could see close up and far away without restrictions. In this world I am legally blind even with glasses.*⁷¹

*I was born legally blind. I could only see about 12 inches in front of me before everything turned into a vast blur. During the experience, I could see everything perfectly.*⁷²

Hearing during near-death experiences is also often described as different from their everyday hearing. The previous version of the NDERF survey asked 1122 NDErs, “Did your hearing differ in any way from your normal, everyday hearing (in any aspect, such as clarity, ability to recognize source of sound, pitch, loudness, etc.)?” with these results:

n=1122	NDErs	%
Yes	512	45.6
Uncertain	259	23.1
No	351	31.3

I previously published the first reported near-death experience in an individual born totally deaf.^{73,74} Brian nearly drowned when he was ten years old. In all of Brian's previous life, he communicated with others by sign language or lip-reading. However, in his NDE, communication was unearthly:

I approached the boundary. No explanation was necessary for me to understand, at the age of ten, that once I cross[ed] the boundary, I could never come back—period. I was more than thrilled to cross. I intended to cross, but my ancestors over another boundary caught my attention. They were talking in telepathy, which caught my attention. I was born profoundly deaf and had all hearing family members, all of which knew sign language! I could read or communicate with about twenty ancestors of mine and others through telepathic methods. It overwhelmed me. I could not believe how many people I could telepathize with simultaneously.⁷⁵

Communication for Brian during his near-death experience was via telepathy which he never previously experienced. NDErs commonly report communicating by telepathy. Other hearing-impaired NDErs may describe supernormal hearing:

I'm a deaf-impaired person. But in the other world experience, I was not deaf. I heard beautiful classical music.⁷⁶

I am partially deaf in the left ear. At the time of this I could hear very well.⁷⁷

I became aware that my eyesight was better than it had ever been. I could see details and colors that I had never seen before. I have always been hard of hearing. But in my experience, my hearing was superior to anything it had ever been. The voices I heard were very loud, clear, and sounded almost like music rather than speech.⁷⁸

As discussed in the Introduction, the most commonly used research tool to distinguish NDEs from non-NDEs is the *NDE Scale*, which is composed of sixteen questions.⁷⁹ The more recently developed NDE-C scale has also been proposed as a questionnaire to help distinguish NDEs from non-NDEs, but is not yet widely used in NDE research.^{80,81} Many NDE Scale questions pertain to supernormal awareness. Here are several relevant NDE Scale questions and the responses from 834 NDErs in the most recent NDERF survey:

Were your senses more vivid than usual?

n=834	NDErs	%
Incredibly more vivid	408	48.9
More vivid than usual	259	31.1

No	167	20.0
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Did you have a feeling of peace or pleasantness?

n=834	NDErs	%
Incredible peace or pleasantness	653	78.3
Relief or calmness	125	15.0
No	56	6.7

Skeptics say that near-death experiences are only the result of what they would have expected to happen when they die. However, supernormal sensory awareness is present in the great majority of NDEs. It is not reasonable to believe that NDErs would expect to suddenly have supernormal senses that they never had at any time in their lives. During a life-threatening event with a sudden loss of consciousness, NDErs would not have time to formulate an expectation of what the experience should be like. In other life-threatening events, consciousness diminishes progressively with fading sensory awareness. For NDEs starting with a progressive loss of consciousness, it is also unreasonable to believe that a sudden transition to supernormal sensory awareness would be expected.

During the unconsciousness of near-death experiences, sensory awareness and consciousness not only continue but are often supernormal. Supernormal sensory awareness is more common in NDEs with higher NDE Scale scores which are more detailed NDEs. All of this is further evidence that our sensations are part of the consciousness surviving bodily death.

Another important point about the consciousness of near-death experiencers is that they accurately remember their NDEs over a prolonged time. Bruce Greyson, MD, published a study of seventy-two NDErs who shared their NDEs and answered the sixteen NDE Scale questions, then answered the same Scale questions again nearly twenty years later.⁸² Responses to both NDE Scale question administrations were compared. There were no significant differences in the overall Scale scores or responses to any of the sixteen questions. Dr. Greyson found that NDE accounts do not seem embellished or forgotten even after nearly twenty years. This study provides some of the most substantial evidence that NDEs are precisely remembered even decades after they occur.

The largest prospective study of near-death experiences by Pim van Lommel, MD, also found that NDEs are remembered accurately.⁸³ In this study, NDErs were interviewed about their NDEs shortly after they happened, then interviewed again two and eight years later. This study found that even eight years after the NDEs, NDErs accurately recalled the details of their experiences.

The best evidence available finds that near-death experiences are recalled correctly, with details of the NDEs neither embellished nor forgotten. This conclusion validates the reliability of retrospective NDE studies where the NDEs may be shared years after their occurrence.

Near-Death Experiences Under General Anesthesia

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines *general anesthesia* as “*anesthesia affecting the entire body and accompanied by loss of consciousness.*”⁸⁴ Anesthesia may be either local or general anesthesia. When the term *anesthesia* is used in this article, it will be referring only to general anesthesia. Adequate anesthesia by itself produces unconsciousness. Occasionally a life-threatening event occurs while under anesthesia. Sometimes patients under anesthesia are already close to death from a life-threatening injury or illness that required urgent surgical intervention. The patient may have a complication from the surgery or an allergy to anesthetic medications that create a life-threatening situation. The life-threatening event may be severe enough to cause a cardiac arrest during surgery, which means that the patient’s heart stops.

Cardiac arrest under anesthesia is generally well documented, as the heart function and breathing are carefully monitored during surgery while anesthesia is used. As previously discussed, a cardiac arrest produces unconsciousness and coma within seconds for people not under anesthesia. Remarkably, typical near-death experiences do happen following a cardiac arrest while under anesthesia. As an example, I previously published the NDE of Valerie, who was 17 years old when her heart stopped during surgery while under anesthesia:

*Sometime during surgery I went through a tunnel. Parts of my life passed me by. I had closed my eyes tight; I remember someone saying, open your eyes. I was in a pure white space and could see rooms with spirits walking around. I started to cry, but no tears. I remember looking at my hands, and they were translucent. Then an angel appeared; she had such a radiant glow to her beauty to behold. She comforted me, telling me I was safe. I remember telling her I wasn’t ready to die. She said she knew that. Then she pointed down, and I could see the doctors doing CPR on a little girl. Not really understanding that was me, I watched my whole operation, CPR and all. I told her that was so sad, she looks so young. Then she said they are bringing her back, and I felt like I was pushed and thrown back into that painful body.*⁸⁵

I previously published a study comparing near-death experiences during general anesthesia with NDEs occurring under all other circumstances.^{86,87} This study was a subset of the prior version of the NDERF survey. The NDEs occurring under general anesthesia in this study generally described a cardiac arrest as the event precipitating the NDEs. Twenty-three NDEs that occurred while under general anesthesia were compared with 590 NDEs not occurring while anesthetized. The NDERF survey included thirty-three questions asking specifically about the NDE content. The answers

from the two groups to these thirty-three questions were compared using a statistical tool called chi-square. Given the large number of survey questions about the NDE content, responses between the two groups were considered statistically significantly different at $p < 0.01$, meaning there was less than a 1 in 100 chance that the differences in responses could be due to chance. A trend toward statistical difference was set at $p < 0.03$, or a less than 3 in 100 chance that the differences in responses might be due only to chance. This study found:

There were no significant differences in the responses to any of the thirty-three survey questions between the two groups, with the exception that anesthesia-associated NDEs reported encountering a tunnel more often. Near-death experiences described as occurring under general anesthesia had all the NDE elements as those not occurring under general anesthesia. Remarkably, NDE elements appear to occur with the same frequency, with the exception of a tunnel experience, regardless of whether or not the NDEr was under general anesthesia at the time of their experience.⁸⁸

If near-death experiences were solely due to physical brain function, NDEs under general anesthesia should have less consciousness and alertness than other NDEs. But that is *not* what the NDERF studies found. A question from the most recent NDERF survey asked, "How did your highest level of consciousness and alertness during the experience compare to your normal everyday consciousness and alertness?" The answer "More consciousness and alertness than normal" was selected by 70.0 percent of the 30 NDErs whose NDEs occurred under anesthesia, and 78.7 percent of the 804 NDErs whose NDEs did not occur under anesthesia. The percentages of the responses to the survey question were not statistically different between the two groups.

The NDERF studies found that typical NDEs happen under anesthesia, usually with greater consciousness and alertness as commonly described in all NDEs. Either general anesthesia alone *or* cardiac arrest alone results in unconsciousness without any possibility of a lucid memory. Thus, typical near-death experiences occurring while under general anesthesia are *doubly* medically inexplicable. This is powerful evidence that consciousness can function apart from the physical body and separate from biological brain function.

Bruce Greyson, MD also reported near-death experiences that occurred under general anesthesia:

In our collection of NDEs, 127 out of 578 NDE cases (22%) occurred under general anesthesia, and they included such features as OBEs that involved experiencers' watching medical personnel working on their bodies, an unusually bright or vivid light, meeting deceased persons, and thoughts, memories, and sensations that were clearer than usual.⁸⁹

Skeptics suggest that near-death experiences occurring during general anesthesia can only be the result of too little anesthesia. This argument ignores NDEs

resulting from accidental anesthesia overdose. Skeptics also overlook that too little anesthesia, medically termed *anesthesia awareness*, produces totally different experiences. Unlike NDEs, anesthesia awareness experiences are often unpleasant, painful, and frightening experiences.⁹⁰ Anesthesia awareness more often involves brief and fragmentary memories with hearing described more than vision. Fortunately, anesthesia awareness is rare, with only about 1 to 3 in 1000 patients experiencing this.⁹¹

The NDERF website supplemental material section has 30 examples of near-death experiences that occurred while under general anesthesia.⁹² Near-death experiences under general anesthesia show that full consciousness can exist separately from the physical body. NDEs arising while under general anesthesia are robust evidence that consciousness survives bodily death.

Encountering Deceased Loved Ones in Near-Death Experiences

In most experiences of altered consciousness such as dreams or hallucinations, if any beings are encountered, they are generally alive at the time. Virtually everyone has dreams and is aware of this. If near-death experiences were only due to physical brain function, then it would be expected that a predominance of the beings encountered would be alive at the time of their NDEs. But as you will see, that is not what happens in NDEs.

Near-death experiencers may see living people during the OBE part of their NDEs as they observe ongoing earthly events. However, when NDEs are taking place in an unearthly or “heavenly” realm, virtually all beings encountered are deceased at the time of the NDEs. This was demonstrated in a study published by Emily Williams Kelly, PhD.⁹³ She investigated 74 NDErs who met the deceased during their NDEs, and compared this group to 200 NDErs who did not meet deceased people. This study found only 4 percent of NDErs described meeting beings who were alive at the time of their NDEs. Kelly found that 95 percent of beings encountered were relatives of the NDErs. Only 5 percent of the beings were friends or acquaintances.

I previously published a study of beings encountered during near-death experiences.^{94,95} This was an investigation of 97 NDEs that described meeting beings they knew from their earthly life. This study excluded people seen by the NDErs only during their OBE observations of earthly events, and also beings seen only during life reviews. Thirteen NDEs were excluded from the study because the NDErs did not state whether the beings they met were alive or deceased at the time of their NDEs. The beings described in the 13 excluded NDEs were mainly grandparents and less often parents. From this information and the context of the NDE narratives, probably the great majority, and perhaps all, of the beings described in these 13 NDEs were deceased. Among the remaining 84 NDEs, only 3, which equals 4 percent, described encountering beings that were definitely alive when they had their NDEs. Thus a remarkably high 96

percent of NDErs described encounters with only deceased beings during their NDEs, a percentage consistent with the findings of the Kelly study. These two studies provide additional significant evidence for the reality of NDEs and an afterlife.

When deceased loved ones are encountered in near-death experiences, they generally appear completely healthy even if they died of a disfiguring accident or illness. Beloved pets that died are also regularly seen in NDEs. Whether NDErs meet cherished deceased people or pets, the reunions are characteristically very joyful. NDErs may also encounter seemingly familiar beings unknown to them during their NDEs that they later identify through old family picture albums.⁹⁶

Near-death experiencers may describe encountering deceased loved ones that they were not aware had died at the time of their NDEs. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, MD, published an example of this.⁹⁷ A Native American woman was hit by a car. She died a few minutes later by the road, but before she died, she told a stranger who stopped to help her, *"If you ever get near the Indian reservation, please tell my mother that I was OK. Not only OK, but very happy because I am already with my dad."* The stranger drove to the Indian reservation where the victim's mother told him that her husband, the victim's father, died of a coronary 700 miles away one hour before the car accident.

Bruce Greyson, MD, published a compilation of experiences with awareness of deceased people not known to be dead at the time of the experiences.⁹⁸ These accounts included near-death experiences and other related experiences. Greyson called them *Peak in Darien* cases. He concluded:

Such cases cannot easily be explained as hallucinations based on expectation; in fact, the experiencer is usually quite surprised and sometimes puzzled by the vision of someone thought to be alive. In some of these cases, the appearance of the vision suggests strong motivation on the part of the deceased individual to communicate a message. As such, these Peak in Darien cases provide some of the most persuasive evidence for the ontological reality of deceased spirits.⁹⁹

NDERF has received many near-death experience accounts describing encounters with people who, unbeknownst to the NDErs, had died before their NDEs.¹⁰⁰ This is illustrated in an NDE from Sandy, who was five years old when she nearly died of encephalitis:

Another smaller beautiful light joined us. The light was a girl about ten years old that looked somewhat like me. She recognized me. We hugged, and she said, "I am your sister. I was named after our grandmother, Willamette, who died one month before I was born. Our parents called me Willie for short. They were waiting to tell you about me later when our parents felt that you were ready." We talked without words. It seemed strange looking back on it, but it was natural at the time. As she kissed me on the head, I felt her warmth and love. She said, "You need to go back now, Sandy." I was shocked as my next-door neighbor and dear friend, Glen, formed and shouted, "Sandy, go home, go home now." He said it with such authority that I quit crying and was back in my body

*instantly. Later, a day after I went into the hospital, I was told that our neighbor, Glen, had died from a sudden heart attack. I drew a picture of my "angel sister" who greeted me and described all she said. My parents were shocked and had a horrified look. They got up and left the room. After a while, they returned. They confirmed that they lost a daughter named Willie. Willie died of accidental poisoning about one year before I was born. They had decided not to tell my brother or me until we better understood what life and death were about.*¹⁰¹

This remarkable near-death experience involved encountering a family friend that she was not aware had died, and meeting her sister who died before Sandy was born. NDErs that encounter deceased siblings during their NDEs that they never knew existed are substantial evidence for the reality of NDE. These types of NDEs also provide vital evidence that NDEs really are providing awareness of an afterlife.

Many other near-death experience accounts describe encounters with deceased brothers and sisters they never knew existed. NDEs with this content generally occur in childhood. Parents may be reluctant to tell their young children about a tragic sibling loss until they are old enough to understand death better. Jessica met her brother for the first time when she nearly died at age eight from encephalitis:

*I did not know about my brother before my experience. I met him at the end of the tunnel. We talked for a while. I was thrilled, as I had asked for a brother since the age of three. I was not sure what place we were in, but we were sitting on white garden furniture. We talked for a while. I asked questions such as does God exist? He answered that God does exist.*¹⁰²

James was also eight years old when he contracted an illness that nearly killed him. In his near-death experience he met several deceased siblings he never knew he had:

*Another angel arrived. We departed, traveling through what most would describe as a tunnel. We reached the gates of Paradise. After arriving, I saw someone that looked somewhat like me. I asked who that person was and was told it was my brother. I did not know I had a brother that had died. We were joined by two other people who were introduced as another brother and sister. They were a set of twins that had also died.*¹⁰³

Encountering the deceased in near-death experiences, especially if the NDErs never knew they had died, is another very persuasive line of evidence for the reality of NDEs and an afterlife.

Cross-Cultural Near-Death Experiences

Portions of the NDERF website are translated into over 30 languages. Thousands of near-death experiences have been shared with NDERF in English and hundreds more in non-English languages from all around the world. This allowed the

most extensive cross-cultural investigation of NDEs ever conducted. These studies found the core content of NDEs to be strikingly similar wherever they occur throughout the world, including in non-Western countries.

I previously published an investigation of 26 near-death experiences shared in English, but with the NDErs living in countries where English was not the predominant language.¹⁰⁴ These NDErs lived in different cultures specific to their country, yet were sufficiently fluent in English that they could share their NDEs and complete the NDERF questionnaire in English. The study comparison group was 583 NDEs shared in English from countries where the predominant language was English. The answers from the two groups to 33 survey questions from the prior version of the NDERF survey regarding the elements of their NDEs were compared. There was no statistical difference in responses to any of the 33 survey questions between the two groups. The study conclusion was:

*The content of near-death experiences appears to be the same around the world. Such experiences, in both English-and non-English-speaking countries, include the same NDE elements. The elements appear to follow the same order of occurrence. In reading the accounts of NDEs from around the world, including those shared in English and those translated into English, I am impressed at how strikingly similar they are.*¹⁰⁵

An essential part of cross-cultural near-death experience research is the study of non-Western NDEs. Non-Western countries are defined as areas of the world that are not predominantly of Christian or Jewish heritage.¹⁰⁶ This is a challenging area of NDE research because there is often a language barrier when studying non-Western NDEs. NDEs are often considered to be ineffable, or difficult to describe in words.¹⁰⁷ Language obstacles may compound the problem of ineffability.¹⁰⁸ In non-Western countries, NDEs may be less known than in Western countries. Most previously published investigations of non-Western NDEs included very few NDEs, which limited their ability to compare and contrast non-Western NDEs with Western NDEs accurately.^{109,110,111,112}

Prior non-Western near-death experience research was often hampered by the lack of a consistent definition of NDE. Many previously published non-Western NDEs were second-person and not shared by the individual who had the experience. A review of the older non-Western NDE literature finds that many described experiences would be better classified as, for example, a period of altered consciousness during recovery from a life-threatening event, dreams, or hallucinatory febrile experiences.¹¹³ Contemporary non-Western NDE research is increasingly focused on investigating experiences appropriately classified as NDEs, with a lucid experience during unconsciousness due to a life-threatening event.

To better understand non-Western near-death experiences, I collaborated with Alinaghi Ghasemiannejad, PhD, an Iranian NDE researcher. We investigated 20 non-Western Iranian NDEs. The conclusion of this study was:

Results from our investigation of Iranian Shiite Muslim NDEs suggest that Muslim NDEs do occur and that they are not rare. This suggests that NDEs may be culturally universal and may reflect transpersonal and transcendental phenomena rather than only materially and culturally based phenomena. The results also suggest that Shiite Muslim NDEs may not be especially different in their main elements from typical Western NDEs and therefore not heavily influenced by cultural variations such as prior religious beliefs.¹¹⁴

I collaborated with Dr. Ghasemiannejad again in another study of 17 Iranian near-death experiences. This study compared the content and aftereffects of Iranian NDEs with typical Western NDEs. This study found:

These findings might be understood to indicate that NDE content reflects three “levels”: a deep structural level- frequently recurring general features such as perception of the physical world from a position outside the body, light, passageways such as tunnels, beings, a border or barrier, and a sense of return to the physical body- along with surface structures at two levels: cultural- such as the appearance of beings usually associated with a particular religion, such as Christ in Christianity and Imams in Shia Islam, and individual- features of the NDE unique to each NDEr. From this perspective, universal/cross-cultural features appear along with cultural and individual expressions of these features, affirming the co-existence of all three levels in any NDE.¹¹⁵

The findings of this study make sense. No two near-death experiences are the same. There is almost always an individual aspect to the NDE. For example, when deceased loved ones are encountered, they are generally personally known by the NDErs. When NDErs encounter spiritual beings, they are usually from their own religions and not unfamiliar spiritual beings from other faiths. However, shining through these expected individual differences in NDEs is their deeper universal/cross-cultural consistency. Worldwide, the characteristic elements of NDEs are universally reported and typically occur in a consistent order.

The most recent version of the NDERF survey allows the unique opportunity to directly compare non-Western with Western near-death experiences. Study entry criteria were a single NDE, shared in English on the English version of the NDERF survey, shared in first-person, and an NDE Scale score of 7 or higher. Twenty-five non-Western NDEs met these criteria and were compared to 809 Western NDEs meeting the same criteria. Non-Western NDEs shared in English was felt to be the best source of direct comparison to Western NDEs because many survey questions contain words and phrases that might be difficult to translate into non-English. NDErs in non-Western countries that know English well enough to complete a detailed survey should be in the best position to answer the English version of the NDERF survey reliably. There were 34 survey questions regarding the NDE elements- which is what occurred during the NDEs. Survey responses between the two groups were compared using chi-square statistics. Due to the large number of survey questions asked, statistical significance for

this chi-square comparison was set at $p < 0.01$ and borderline statistical significance at $p < 0.05$.

Direct comparison of non-Western and Western near-death experiences in this manner has never been previously reported. The results of this study found that every element of NDE occurred in both groups. Of the 34 survey questions regarding NDE elements, there was no statistical significance in the responses between the two groups for 30 of the 34 questions (88%). Borderline statistical significance was present in another four of the survey questions (12%). Overall, there was no difference in responses to the survey questions that were statistically significant or even borderline significant for 26 (76%) of the 34 survey questions.¹¹⁶

Several survey questions with statistically different responses between non-Western and Western NDErs might be challenging to answer even for those with English as a first language. For example, two survey questions with statistically different responses between the two groups were, “How did your highest level of consciousness and alertness during the experience compare to your normal everyday consciousness and alertness?” and “During your experience, did you encounter any specific information / awareness that a mystical universal connection or unity/oneness either does (or does not) exist?” Given the complexity of some survey questions, the similarity in responses between the non-Western and Western NDE groups is notable. This study of the content of non-Western and Western NDEs provides further significant evidence of a deep universal and cross-cultural consistency among NDEs worldwide regardless of the cultural background of the NDErs.

Western near-death experiences as a whole do not seem to be significantly culturally determined. I was part of a team that reviewed thirty years of research about the characteristics of Western near-death experiences. Our findings were published in a scholarly book chapter. In this review, we could not find any core characteristics of Western NDEs that seemed culturally determined. We concluded:

*Researchers so far have tended to find that most hypothesized predictors of NDE occurrence, incidence, contents, and aftereffects are not reliable.*¹¹⁷

The cross-cultural study of near-death experiences is more than just statistics. To deeply understand NDEs there is no substitute for *reading* NDEs from all around the world, including non-Western countries. Volunteer human translators have translated near-death experiences shared with NDERF into over thirty different languages. This allows people everywhere to readily understand the remarkable similarity of the content of NDEs regardless of where in the world the NDEs occurred.

The NDERF website has supplemental material with over 200 NDEs shared in dozens of non-English languages that have been translated into English.¹¹⁸ The full text of the 25 non-Western NDEs from the study reported in this section is also available as supplemental material.¹¹⁹ In addition to the NDEs in the supplemental material, NDERF has hundreds of additional NDEs shared in non-English languages that have been

translated into English. Throughout the NDERF website there are scores of non-Western NDEs shared in both English or the non-English native language. Reading NDEs from around the world is a convincing way to understand their deep cross-cultural core consistency. The striking similarity of the content of NDEs globally, including those from non-Western countries, is further substantial evidence for the reality of NDEs.

Children's Near-Death Experiences

An important line of evidence for the reality of near-death experiences and its consistent message of the afterlife comes from investigating the NDEs of very young children. If NDE content is significantly culturally determined or based on prior life experiences, then very young children should have NDE content quite different from older children and adults. However, that is not what investigations by myself and others found. I previously published a study comparing the content of NDEs in very young children with older children and adults.^{120,121} I compared the NDEs of 26 children with NDEs occurring at age five and younger with 585 NDEs that occurred at age six and older. The average age of the five-year-old and younger group at the time of their NDEs was 3.6 years old. Responses to 33 survey questions from the prior version of the NDERF survey regarding the content of the NDEs were compared. This study concluded:

*Very young children had every NDE element that older children and adults had. There was no statistically significant difference in the responses to any of the thirty-three survey questions regarding the content of the NDEs between very young children and older children and adults. There were only two questions with a trend toward a statistically different response between the two groups.*¹²²

This prior study was replicated with data from the most recent version of the NDERF survey that included 34 survey questions regarding the content of near-death experiences. This investigation compared NDEs occurring in 33 children age five and younger with 798 NDEs that happened at age six and older. The average age of the five-year-old and younger group at the time of their NDEs was 3.8 years old. Three NDEs were excluded as information about their age when their NDEs occurred was not available. Chi-square statistics were used to compare the survey question responses between the two groups. The criteria for statistical significance were the same as was used for the study of non-Western NDEs reported in the previous section. The full text of all 33 NDEs occurring in children age five and younger is available on the NDERF website.¹²³

There were no statistically significant differences in responses to any of the 34 survey questions between the two groups. There were only three survey questions with borderline statistically significant different answers between the two groups. Very young children near-death experiencers were borderline statistically more likely to respond to the survey question, "Did you see deceased or religious spirits?" with a response of

“No.” Very young children NDErs were also borderline statistically more likely to respond “No” to the question, “Did you encounter or become aware of any beings who previously lived on earth who are described by name in religions (for example: Jesus, Muhammad, Buddha, etc.)?” Young children NDErs also were borderline statistically significantly more likely to reply “Uncertain” to the survey question, “Did you reach a boundary or limiting physical structure?” For the other 31 survey questions, there were no statistical or borderline statistical differences in the responses between the two groups.

Understandably, very young children might be less likely to encounter deceased or religious spirits, and beings from religions during their near-death experiences due to their young age. They may not have lived long enough to be aware of or understand religious beings.

The findings of the NDERF studies are corroborated by an investigation of Cherie Sutherland, PhD, a prominent near-death experience researcher. Dr. Sutherland reviewed studies published over thirty years in the scholarly literature regarding the NDEs of children, including very young children. Dr. Sutherland concluded this about NDEs in very young children:

*It has often been supposed that the NDEs of very young children will have a content limited to their vocabulary. However, it is now clear that the age of children at the time of their NDE does not in any way determine its complexity. Even prelinguistic children have later reported quite complex experiences... Age does not seem in any way to affect the content of the NDE.*¹²⁴

Skeptics may say that near-death experiences in children may not be accurately recalled when reported many years later. This concern was addressed by William Serdahely, PhD, in his study comparing five NDEs shared by children with five NDEs that occurred in children and were shared many years later when they were adults. He compared 47 NDE characteristics between the two groups. Dr. Serdahely concluded:

*This study...supports the claims of previous researchers that adults' retrospective reports of childhood NDEs are not embellished or distorted.*¹²⁵

Another study by Bruce Greyson, MD, provided substantial evidence that near-death experiences are neither embellished nor forgotten even after nearly 20 years.¹²⁶ This study included 72 NDErs who responded to the sixteen questions in the NDE Scale in the 1980s and answered the same questions again an average of more than 19 years later. Greyson compared the responses from the two NDE Scale administrations. There were no significant differences in the overall NDE Scale scores or the answers to any of the sixteen questions comprising the NDE Scale.

The most extensive prospective study of near-death experiences ever reported also found that near-death experiencers accurately recalled their NDEs eight years after the NDEs occurred.¹²⁷

The most recent version of the NDERF survey asked 834 near-death experiencers, “How accurately do you remember the experience in comparison to other life events that occurred around the time of the experience?” Responses were:

n=834	NDErs	%
I remember the experience more accurately than other life events that occurred around the time of the experience.	598	71.7
I remember the experience as accurately as other life events that occurred around the time of the experience.	142	17.0
I remember the experience less accurately than other life events that occurred around the time of the experience.	17	2.0
I do not know how my remembrance of the experience compares to my remembrance of other life events that occurred around the time of the experience.	77	9.2

This survey question allowed a narrative response. Near-death experiencers often shared that they remember their NDEs exceptionally vividly:

*I remember it more accurately than any other experience in my life because it was absolutely fascinating to see the other side!*¹²⁸

*This experience has been vividly with me for 50 years. It is as real today as when it happened.*¹²⁹

*Although this happened many years ago, this is the event that stands out among all others in my memory.*¹³⁰

The best evidence finds that NDEs are generally reliably recalled years to decades later. This is exceptionally pertinent not only for investigating NDEs that occurred in children but also for helping to validate all retrospective NDE research regardless of the age that the NDEs occurred.

The NDERF studies are by far the most extensive investigations of near-death experiences in very young children. These studies find that the core content of the NDEs in very young children is impressively similar to the core content of NDEs in older children and adults. We are now more confident than ever that the content of NDEs in very young children is not significantly affected by their NDEs occurring at such a young age. The NDEs of very young children strongly support the concept that core NDE content is not significantly modified by prior life experiences, beliefs, or cultural influences. This is further strong evidence that NDEs are real, along with their consistent message of an afterlife.

Life Reviews in Near-Death Experiences

A life review during a near-death experience involves seeing all or part of their previous earthly life. Life reviews occur in about 20% of NDEs.¹³¹ The details described in life reviews may vary. One study found:

*The most important finding of the present study is the evidence of a wide variety in the life reviews the subjects experience... The popular picture of the 'whole life' being seen all at once (panoramicly) is false as a generalization about these experiences. Some subjects do indeed have this kind of experience, but the majority [do] not.*¹³²

The NDERF studies also found that the setting in which life reviews occur during near-death experiences can vary. In life reviews, it is common for NDErs to see pictures of their life flashing, as if on a screen. The life review may be a sequential order of prior life events, or it may skip around. There is often one or more beings with the NDErs during life reviews. NDErs almost never report being judged by other beings during their life reviews. NDErs report a range of emotions, including feeling happy or sad about what they see in their prior lives. Life reviews are among the transformative events that happen in NDEs.¹³³ The lessons learned from the life review may help NDErs to live better lives after they recover from their close brush with death.

Here are some examples of life reviews in near-death experiences:

*My whole life was there for me to witness, much like a movie film of pictures filling up in front of me with a solid background. I was not aware of anything other than these pictures. I would not call this "my life flashing before me" because it was still and entirely present. Knowing and experiencing each emotion ALL AT ONCE, and not one after the other, was incredible to me.*¹³⁴

*There is no way to describe the immaculate beauty of this experience, though I've tried every day for the last 35 years. I wish I could find a way. Bliss is a merely descriptive word. 'Bliss' is close yet does not convey what I wish I could. I saw and experienced every detail of my present life up to that moment. It was like watching a movie yet starring as the main character while everything happened simultaneously. As I had not lived my life in a state of serene joy, I felt quite sad and ashamed. I re-experienced every moment of my life in refined detail, including feelings, thoughts, sounds, smells, people, loves, hates, anger, sorrow, fear, happiness, fun times, food, everything up until I was in the Goldenness. It was like I relived my life, but from the standpoint of a witness.*¹³⁵

Some life reviews include awareness of only part of their prior lives:

*It was so natural. We discussed my life while I relived what seemed like portions of it. The review proceeded from the oldest event to the youngest event and only stopped when I seemed uncertain of my actions at the time. There was no condemnation, right or wrong. I felt complete acceptance and understanding with only one loving 'don't you think you could have done it this way' type of comment. You judge yourself!*¹³⁶

One of the more astounding aspects of life reviews is that some near-death experiencers relive their lives through the perspective of those they interacted with:

I went through a life review. The life review was all about my relationships with others. During this, I felt what they had felt in my relationship with them. I felt their love, pain, or hurt from things I did or said to them. Their hurt or pain made me cringe. I found myself thinking, 'Oooh, I could have done better there.' But what I mainly felt was love, so it was not too bad. No one judged me during this life review. There was no disapproval from anyone else. I felt only my personal reactions to it all while the feeling of unconditional love continued to saturate me. I judged myself, and nobody else judged me in this life review.¹³⁷

Here is another example of a life review with awareness of the feelings of others:

I went into a dark place with nothing around me, but I was not scared. It was peaceful there. I started to see my whole life unfolding before me like a film projected on a screen, from babyhood to adult life. It was so real! I was looking at myself, but it was better than a 3D movie. I could sense the feelings of the people I had interacted with through the years. I could feel the good and bad emotions I made them experience.¹³⁸

Life reviews with awareness of what others were thinking and feeling while the near-death experiencers interacted with them are robust evidence for a consciousness that transcends the physical. These types of NDEs support the reality of an afterlife with retained accurate and detailed remembrance of our entire lives.

When near-death experiences occur, the NDErs are usually unconscious or clinically dead for only a brief time. The awareness of part or all of their prior lives during such a short time of unconsciousness illustrates the remarkable acceleration of consciousness commonly described in NDEs.

I previously published a study investigating the reality of what is observed in life reviews.^{139,140} If near-death experiences and their associated life reviews are real, then it would be expected that the events in life reviews, even if long forgotten, actually did occur. I reviewed 617 sequentially shared NDEs and found life reviews described in 88 (14%). In reviewing these 88 NDEs, none of the life reviews contained any unrealistic content, either by my determination or the NDErs themselves.

NDErs may become aware of events during their life reviews that they had forgotten. However, when they later investigated what they saw in their life reviews, they confirmed that the events actually occurred. Here is an example from Alma, who was 54 years old when she had her NDE. Alma was vividly aware of her early childhood during a life review:

A moving-art drawing of my life was presented to me, followed by another, and yet another. I was having a life review. I was moving in the drawings, and they showed me that I was kind to people at different ages of my life. At about two years of age, the first moving drawing was me chasing a butterfly that was teasing me to pursue it. I was

*giggling and having fun as I was playing with this butterfly. I had a pinafore edge dress on, was in a park, and running with the delight of being a little girl. I was sure that I saw myself in the moving picture drawings being presented to me. It was a life review, although I could not have known that at the time. I later saw a picture of myself as a child and recognized that I was in the same park as during my NDE. I was about two years old in the photo. I asked my mother to find a photo of me for a class project in 2017. I saw the pinafore dress I was wearing during my NDE.*¹⁴¹

Life reviews consistently describe events that actually occurred in the lives of near-death experiencers. Virtually nobody has a perfect recall of every prior event of their life unless they have an NDE. Examples of over 150 life reviews are available as supplemental material on the NDERF website.¹⁴² NDErs that have life reviews can vividly understand how their actions affect others. This awareness helps them to make more loving choices for the rest of their lives. This observation, along with the remarkable acceleration of consciousness and verification of long-forgotten memories in life reviews, provides further strong evidence for the reality of near-death experiences and an afterlife.

Near-Death Experience Aftereffects

Near-death experiences usually produce long-lasting changes in beliefs and attitudes. The changes following NDEs are collectively referred to as *aftereffects* and often take many years to develop fully.¹⁴³ The aftereffects of NDEs have been extensively investigated. One of the earliest NDE studies found that NDErs were more likely to be self-confident, have a stronger sense of spirituality, reduced materialistic values, and have a greater appreciation of life.¹⁴⁴ Over time, NDErs often become increasingly concerned about others.¹⁴⁵ NDErs also may become progressively more confident that life has meaning and purpose.^{146,147,148}

People generally don't make substantial and lasting changes in their lives in response to unreal experiences such as dreams or hallucinations. They also don't ordinarily make considerable life changes after their experiences if they doubt that the experiences are real. However, near-death experiencers generally accept the reality of their NDEs and usually respond with significant changes in their lives.

One of the most common near-death experience aftereffects is an increased belief in an afterlife. Multiple prior studies confirm the frequent increased belief in an afterlife following NDEs.^{149,150,151,152,153} This is not surprising, as NDErs typically believe they personally glimpsed an afterlife.

The most recent version of the NDERF survey explores near-death experience aftereffects by asking questions about beliefs and values at the time of their NDEs and when they shared their experiences with NDERF. The responses to these questions are among the most remarkable in the entire NDERF survey. Over and over, the survey

answers show enormous changes in the beliefs and values of the NDErs. There may be no other single life event in the lives of the NDErs that is associated with such sizeable and lasting changes in beliefs and values.

The most recent version of the NDERF survey asked 834 NDErs about their belief in an afterlife before their NDEs and at the time they shared their NDEs. Results of this survey are:

Before my experience I believed:

n=834	NDErs	%
An afterlife definitely exists	204	24.5
An afterlife probably exists	208	24.9
I was uncertain if an afterlife exists	234	28.1
An afterlife probably does not exist	45	5.4
An afterlife does not exist	48	5.8
Unknown	95	11.4

The next question in the NDERF survey asked about belief in an afterlife after their NDEs:

At the current time I believe:

n=834	NDErs	%
An afterlife definitely exists	703	84.3
An afterlife probably exists	62	7.4
I am uncertain if an afterlife exists	45	5.4
An afterlife probably does not exist	4	0.5
An afterlife does not exist	3	0.4
Unknown	17	2.0

These data show a dramatic shift toward increased belief in an afterlife following near-death experiences. Not every NDEr believes in an afterlife, which is understandable. Belief in an afterlife is subject to many influences, including firmly held beliefs before their NDEs. Some NDEs may be brief with little content. Brief NDEs may not provide sufficiently convincing evidence of an afterlife to the NDErs. Evidence that more detailed NDEs are associated with an increased belief in an afterlife is available from the most recent NDERF survey. 63 NDErs had an NDE Scale score of 25 and higher, which are *very* detailed NDEs. Remarkably, when they shared their NDEs, all 63 NDErs responded to the survey question mentioned above by selecting the response “An afterlife definitely exists.” NDE aftereffects, including increased confidence in an afterlife, are significant evidence for the reality of NDEs and conscious existence after bodily death.

Another common change in belief following near-death experiences is a decreased fear of death. This should also not be surprising, as NDErs usually know from their NDEs that there is a wonderful afterlife beyond death's door. The most recent version of the NDERF survey asked 834 NDErs about their belief in an afterlife before their NDEs and at the time they shared their NDEs. Results of this survey are:

Before my experience:

n=834	NDErs	%
I greatly feared death	271	32.5
I moderately feared death	248	29.7
I slightly feared death	124	14.9
I did not fear death	109	13.1
Unknown	82	9.8

The next question in the NDERF survey asked about their fear of death following their NDEs:

At the current time:

n=834	NDErs	%
I greatly fear death	23	2.8
I moderately fear death	55	6.6
I slightly fear death	100	12.0
I do not fear death	641	76.9
Unknown	15	1.8

The NDERF study shows a dramatic reduction in fear of death after near-death experiences. The survey found that 13.1% of NDErs surveyed did not fear death before their NDEs, and 76.9% did not fear death after their NDEs. This is an extraordinary increase in the percentage of the survey respondents expressing a lack of fear of death. The NDERF survey questions regarding changes in belief about an afterlife and fear of death both show substantial alterations in what NDErs believe following their NDEs. The NDERF study results are consistent with the concept that most NDErs accept the reality of their NDEs and often substantially change their beliefs accordingly.

Near-death experiencers usually believe that their NDEs are essential evidence of an afterlife and change their beliefs about the afterlife accordingly. This fact makes the NDE aftereffects of increased confidence in an afterlife and decreased fear of death another significant line of evidence for the reality of NDEs, along with their consistent message of the survival of consciousness after bodily death.

Near-Death Experience Reality as Determined by Near-Death Experiencers

An excellent way to determine if near-death experiences are real is to ask those who personally had NDEs. The average age of those sharing their NDEs with NDERF is 50.3 years old. Their NDEs happened an average of 22.3 years previously. Thus, most NDErs had many years or decades of life following their NDEs to determine if their NDEs were real or unreal. An NDERF survey question from the most recent NDERF survey asked 834 NDErs, “What do you believe about the reality of your experience at the current time.” The responses were:

n=834	NDErs	%
Experience was definitely real	782	93.8
Experience was probably real	41	4.9
Experience was probably not real	10	1.2
Experience was definitely not real	1	0.1

These remarkable statistics show that virtually all near-death experiencers surveyed believe their NDEs were *definitely real*. You can see this for yourself in the hundreds of narrative responses from NDErs about the reality of their NDEs on the NDERF website.¹⁵⁴ Nearly all NDErs accept their experiences as authentic. What occurs in NDEs may seem remarkable. However, the consistent message from those who had NDEs is that NDEs are real.

Skeptics will continue to argue that near-death experiences are hallucinatory or unreal memories. Out of respect for people’s ability to generally understand reality, if skeptics want to claim that NDEs are not real, then the skeptics need to present convincing evidence that NDEs are not real. However, skeptics cannot adequately explain *any* of the lines of evidence for the reality of NDE presented in this article. Skeptics have proposed greater than twenty different and widely varying “explanations” of NDEs over many decades. If skeptics accepted any of their “explanations” as plausible, then there would not be so many varied skeptical arguments purporting to show that NDEs are unreal. When any skeptic attempts to explain away NDEs as unreal experiences, it is crucial to determine if the proposed skeptical “explanation” adequately explains *all* the lines of evidence for the reality of NDE. While it is beyond the scope of this article to comprehensively review all the arguments proposed by NDE skeptics, the most significant skeptical arguments are compiled and refuted on the NDERF website.¹⁵⁵

Shared Near-Death Experiences

Shared near-death experiences are defined as occurring when two or more people have a life-threatening event simultaneously, with at least one person surviving and the other(s) permanently dying. They are aware of the other(s) during their experiences and often interact with each other. The surviving person, the NDEr, later describes the shared NDE. Shared NDEs are important, as they provide one of the

most direct lines of evidence that what is described in NDEs is the initial experience of those who permanently die. Here is an example:

I was in the car taking my girlfriend to her parent's home in Welland. I fell asleep while driving. I then realized that we were out of our bodies and flying quickly upward while holding hands. We flew straight up for about a minute. We then saw a park or countryside-like landscape. Suddenly, we encountered four creatures. Two flanked each of us, and they began to separate us gently. They overwhelmed us with a feeling of the highest love and compassion beyond anything we could experience on earth. We were feeling a divine love. Therefore, we did not resist their effort. I felt sort of like a baby in mother's arms, though it's hard to describe accurately. Two of the creatures moved her upward toward the distant landscape, and two moved me back downward. I felt so much love, peace, and comfort that I wanted to protest and say, "No, please let me stay here." But I heard inwardly or psychically that I couldn't stay. Next, I saw my car in flames, from about a quarter-mile up above. I felt a falling sensation and awakened in the car. The front was on fire. I moved her from leaning on me, as she was when I fell asleep, knowing that her body was only an empty shell. I had left her above with the beings.¹⁵⁶

Some shared near-death experiences include awareness of another person dying geographically far away or without the NDEr knowing that the person they encountered in their NDE was dying. An example of this is from Jennifer, who had multiple NDEs over a short time interval due to surgical complications. This shared NDE is remarkable given that her NDE occurred in Florida, yet she interacted with her uncle who died unexpectedly at the same time in Pennsylvania:

During the other NDE I had, I was in my late uncle's operating room in Pennsylvania. My relatives and I did not know that Uncle Bill went into the hospital for elective surgery to remove some polyps. He wasn't ill, so it should have been an easy routine operation. I found myself together with him, hovering in the corner of his operating room, watching his medical team cover his dead body. We didn't speak or look at each other. He was not wearing glasses as he had in life. I had a shape or form, as did Uncle Bill. We communicated without speaking or using words. We communicated with a meaning that conveyed a knowing. I don't know how to express it. We watched them cover his body, and we then left the room. I understood that I was the only person of my relatives who was aware of my uncle's passing. After I recovered consciousness, I wondered why nobody talked about my uncle's death. Why hadn't anyone mentioned it? I then realized that they were not aware my uncle had died. This was confirmed when I asked what happened to Uncle Bill, and they didn't know what I was talking about.¹⁵⁷

David was seriously injured in a severe auto accident that killed his friend. They shared an NDE:

It was like looking down through the branches of a tree. I saw a fuzzy and dark image. I thought, 'What is that?' My friend answered, 'I do not know, what is that?' The images

*were distorted like the sunlight seen from the bottom of a swimming pool. The dim fuzzy dark image was illuminated momentarily by brighter lines moving across our field of view. I said to my friend, 'That is my brother's car.' I saw a police car to the left, and a group of people behind the police car. To the right was an ambulance and another police car. My friend said, 'That is us.' At that moment, we both said, 'We are dead.'*¹⁵⁸

When shared near-death experiences occur, they may happen with observations of ongoing earthly events or in an unearthly realm. Lacey was riding with her husband on a motorcycle. They crashed, and her husband died. Lacey survived with serious injuries. They shared an NDE in an unearthly realm:

*I began to fly through the tunnel, and the first thing I noticed was looking down at the embankment we had crashed into. I felt the pull to go further becoming ever stronger until I reached the tunnel where a light appeared. I continued fighting with all my strength to stop and not go further. Suddenly I was in a field of tall, beautiful, green grass. The grass undulated in waves, yet there was no wind. Overhead the sky was pink/rosy/purple. I felt a strong sense of well-being as if I were in a beautiful paradise, sort of like the Garden of Eden. My husband was walking towards me through the grass. We looked at each other, and without talking, I understood he had died. I knew we had to say goodbye at this moment. He let me know that he will be waiting for me, but I need to care for our boys for now. I was then back on the ground in my body and feeling overwhelming pain.*¹⁵⁹

Skeptics may say that near-death experiences may not tell us what happens to those who have permanently died. But shared NDEs, while uncommon, are significant evidence that NDEs are describing the actual beginning of a very real afterlife.

Shared near-death experiences suggest that what occurs in NDEs is the initial journey of the irrevocably deceased. The NDERF website has received more than a dozen shared NDEs over the years, and they are available for review by anyone.¹⁶⁰ These are among the most remarkable of NDEs and provide powerful evidence for the reality of NDEs and their consistent message of an afterlife.

The Consistent Spiritual Content of Near-Death Experiences

Any investigation finding evidence that consciousness survives bodily death would be expected to provide insight into what that conscious existence is like after bodily death. As you will see, the remarkably consistent spiritual content in near-death experiences provides this insight with a profound message of reassurance and inspiration for all of humanity.

This section will review the spiritual content of near-death experiences. The word *spiritual* means different things to different people. Regarding the spiritual content of NDEs, the term *spiritual* will be used consistently with the Webster dictionary definition of *spirit*, which is: *A supernatural being or essence.*¹⁶¹ Consciousness in NDEs is apart

from the physical body and may be conceptualized as a *supernatural essence*. The Webster dictionary definition of *spirit* makes no assumptions regarding any religious or other specific beliefs.

An essential scientific principle is that what is real is consistently observed. In a previous section we found that when near-death experiencers see ongoing earthly events while out-of-body, they are generally exceptionally accurate. Given this, it is reasonable to believe that when NDErs consistently describe their often unearthly spiritual experiences, they are similarly accurate.

The spiritual content in near-death experiences is often unlike what the NDErs could have expected based on their pre-existing beliefs. The spiritual content is often described as *unearthly*, which further contrasts the spiritual content in their NDEs from any prior earthly experiences.

When near-death experiencers are in unearthly realms, they often feel overwhelming sensations of peace and love. Here are examples of the peace that NDErs experience:

*I was more aware of how ridiculous my fears were and how they didn't compare to the intense peace and love I was feeling at the time.*¹⁶²

*Indescribable joy, happiness, and peace.*¹⁶³

*Conscious of peace and love on a much higher level than usual.*¹⁶⁴

We will discuss the love that near-death experiencers encounter in detail later. For now, you can get a sense of the unearthly love commonly described in NDEs:

*I knew the being I met was composed in its very atoms of a substance I can only call love. That substance created a force or power like electricity is here. Love is the only word I have. It is not the right word here.*¹⁶⁵

*I knew that love was the greatest force around us and that we are all love. Love is the only real thing. Hatred, pain, hurt, and all the negative things are not the way it really is.*¹⁶⁶

*Love was everywhere. It permeated the afterlife. It was incredible.*¹⁶⁷

I could go on with literally hundreds of quotes like these from near-death experiences, but you get the picture. The otherworldly love commonly encountered in NDEs is often powerful, overwhelming, and may be difficult to express in mere words. One previously published study analyzed hundreds of NDEs posted on the NDERF website to find the most common words used to describe the phenomenology of their experiences.¹⁶⁸ The two most common words were *light* and *love*.

Another common spiritual message from near-death experiences is that every one of us is united in the afterlife. This also will be discussed later in more detail. I will let the NDErs themselves introduce this important spiritual aspect of NDEs:

We are each pieces of a greater whole, as I understand it. Getting back where we can all be together again is the ultimate "going home."¹⁶⁹

I felt a universal connection or unity, but it didn't seem mystical at the time. It just felt like this IS how it is. In retrospect, it appears mysterious or unearthly, but at the time it was apparent that everything is interconnected, and it was plain and simple.¹⁷⁰

I was aware of a oneness, a connection with God and all the other souls, and individuality.¹⁷¹

I felt like a single atom as a single point of energy, surrounded by other energy. We were all connected; we were all infinite. I felt like I belonged. I felt at peace.¹⁷²

Many near-death experiencers find themselves in realms vastly different from anything they knew from their earthly lives. It is rare for NDErs to encounter realms that are frightening or hellish. These unusual NDEs are sufficiently rare that they are outside the scope of this article but are discussed on the NDERF website.¹⁷³

Unearthly realms in near-death experiences may be analogous to earth but enormously more beautiful. NDErs may encounter mountains, forests, streams, lakes, and dwellings which they often describe as distinctly unearthly in appearance due to their exceptional beauty, brightness, or scale. Wendy shares an example of this otherworldly beauty. During surgery, her heart stopped. CPR was started, and she had an NDE:

I came through the light and knew everyone there. They were delighted to see me and welcomed me home. All of them were dead relatives that I never met before, yet I knew everyone. They appeared in human form to allow me to recognize them. However, I sensed that was not their real form now. I was connected with everyone and had an almost a collective consciousness, though I cannot describe it. I feel so many emotions as I recall this. It felt like a blanket of love was wrapped around me when I came through the light before I saw everyone. There is no feeling here that can express the love or feelings I felt there. Everything was "pure", such as the brightest blues, greens, reds, yellows, whites, purples etc. It was like removing a filter so that I could now see the purity of everything.

I went to the right where I saw what I believe was God, who was pure energy. Yet you knew who it was and the great wisdom within. God spoke to me, stating that the message for me to bring back was love. We all have to live in love.

The next thing I saw was a meadow in the mountains of indescribable beauty. The sky was the bluest blue, and the grass was the greenest green. All colors here are extremely pale compared to there. I saw my grandmother with children running towards me. She took me by the hand, and we were on the beginning of a bridge over a small creek. I had just turned nine when she died. We talked for seemingly hours about my life since she died. We also talked about when she came to let me know that she died,

*say goodbye until we would meet again, and not be sad. She died of a brain tumor, yet now she was vibrant and healthy. I told her how much I missed her, and she said that she watches over my son and me. She then said something unexpected: She said I had to go back and it was not my time yet.*¹⁷⁴

The most recent version of the NDERF survey has many questions designed to investigate the spiritual content of near-death experiences. What follows are the results from the largest study of the spiritual content of NDEs ever reported.

As mentioned earlier, *love* is the second most common word used by near-death experiencers to describe the phenomenology of their NDEs. The concept of love may be the most important spiritual concept in NDEs. To further understand love in NDEs, the most recent NDERF survey asked, “During your experience, did you encounter any specific information / awareness regarding love?” The question emphasized that this was information or awareness regarding love specifically encountered *during* their NDE, and not at any other time in their life. Here are the results:

n=834	NDErs	%
Yes	476	57.1
Uncertain	68	8.2
No	290	34.8

This is a remarkably high percentage of “Yes” responses. To put this in perspective, a much higher percentage of NDErs answered “Yes” to this question than to survey questions regarding other well-known characteristics of NDEs such as experiencing a tunnel, a life review, and encountering deceased loved ones. The NDERF survey question regarding love requested a narrative response by asking, “If yes or uncertain, describe in as much detail as possible.” The narrative answers to this question described the love encountered in NDEs as immense, all-encompassing, and universal. As you read these quotes from NDErs about love, you can feel the passion in their words:

*There was nothing that was not love. This love is not what we know on earth. It has nothing to do with feelings. It is like transitioning from being unable to breathe to where everything is air. It is the essence of everything and what we are. I would not call it love, bliss, peace, or oneness. It is an indescribable sense of belonging to everything, being everything, and being home.*¹⁷⁵

*I was surrounded by unconditional and never-ending love. It was the origin, a fabric of all that everything is made of. It totally enveloped me and held me.*¹⁷⁶

*It is all and only about LOVE. We come here to love ourselves as a part of God. We also come here to love everyone.*¹⁷⁷

Near-death experiencers often describe the love in their NDEs as a part of everything, as if love really does connect everyone *and* everything. NDErs routinely

express the love they encountered as all-encompassing and beyond any love they could have possibly known in their earthly lives. In NDEs, this universal, enveloping, and extraordinary love is consistently described. This regularly described unworldly love in NDEs exemplifies the remarkable consistency of spiritual content in NDEs. Here are more examples of love described in NDEs:

*Love and overcoming the fear of death is what it's all about. There is no death.*¹⁷⁸

*Light, love, and God are the same. Accessible and free.*¹⁷⁹

*I became aware of the totality of unconditional love and that it was endless there. Love did not have to be earned, as it was already offered to all who would accept it.*¹⁸⁰

*We are love, peace, and all that is on the other side. That is what our soul is made of, and that is what we should be sharing.*¹⁸¹

Many near-death experiencers emphasized that the love they encountered was beyond human language:

*The human word "love" can't begin to address true love.*¹⁸²

*Love wasn't a stand-alone and clearly defined item. It was part of everything else. It was pervasive.*¹⁸³

*The love I felt was indescribable. No words can describe how profound it was.*¹⁸⁴

For near-death experiencers discovering such all-encompassing spiritual love, this awareness can be life-changing. NDErs often become more loving and compassionate following their NDEs. Throughout history and around the world there have always been substantially different views of what love is. This makes it all the more remarkable that love in NDEs is described so consistently.

Near-death experiencers often describe an awareness or encounter with God. When God is encountered in NDEs, the most common word used to describe the appearance of God is *light*.¹⁸⁵ NDErs often point out that God is an earthly word that does not do justice to the transcendent God they encountered. NDErs express this concept when they say:

*The words we use in this world cannot be translated to the words in the world of God.*¹⁸⁶

*My church is inside of me. God is a part of me and my experience. God is just a small word compared to what I experienced.*¹⁸⁷

When near-death experiencers encounter God, they are generally in an otherworldly realm. Thus, it is not surprising that God may appear variably to different NDErs:

*I thought that if I were a Buddhist, perhaps he would look like Buddha. I was told, 'That is right. God appears in a familiar form.'*¹⁸⁸

*I was also told that no one can 'see' God. At the very end of the experience, I was shown an image of God that I understood to be God. I was aware that it was a custom image made for me in a way I would understand.*¹⁸⁹

The most recent version of the NDERF survey asks, “During your experience, did you encounter any specific information / awareness that God or a supreme being either does (or does not) exist?” As with the question regarding love in near-death experiences, the question emphasized that this was information/awareness of God or a supreme being from their NDEs only. The results are:

n=834	NDErs	%
Yes	400	48.0
Uncertain	107	12.8
No	327	39.2

The “or does not” part of the survey question was added to see if any significant percentage of near-death experiencers encountered information that God does not exist. Following this question, the next survey question asked, “If yes or uncertain, describe in as much detail as possible.” In reviewing the narrative responses, virtually all NDErs responding affirmatively to the question had encountered information that God *does* exist during their NDEs. The NDERF survey found that an impressively high percentage of NDErs described encountering or becoming aware of God during their NDEs. The narrative responses to this question allowed a better understanding of God as described in NDEs. Hundreds of NDErs describe encountering God in the NDERF website supplementary material.¹⁹⁰

Given that nearly half of all near-death experiencers in the NDERF survey encountered or were aware of God, it would be expected that many NDErs would increasingly believe in God after their NDEs. That is exactly what the NDERF survey found. 834 NDErs were asked about their belief in God before their NDEs, and at the time they shared their NDEs. Results of this survey are:

Before my experience I believed:

n=834	NDErs	%
God definitely exists	311	37.3
God probably exists	193	23.1
I was uncertain if God exists	162	19.4
God probably does not exist	44	5.3
God does not exist	44	5.3
Unknown	80	9.6

The next question in the NDERF survey asked about belief in God after their near-death experiences:

At the current time I believe:

n=834	NDErs	%
God definitely exists	598	71.7
God probably exists	69	8.3
I am uncertain if God exists	61	7.3
God probably does not exist	20	2.4
God does not exist	31	3.7
Unknown	55	6.6

The increased acceptance of the reality of God following near-death experiences is remarkable. From the survey, belief that God definitely exists rose from 37.3% before their NDEs to 71.7% after their NDEs. This is entirely consistent with the frequent awareness of God in NDEs. This extraordinary increased belief in God further shows that NDErs generally accept the reality of their experiences and change their beliefs in response to their NDEs.

A small prospective study of near-death experiencers found they were statistically much more likely to have an inner sense of God's presence in comparison to a control group that did not have NDEs.¹⁹¹ Retrospective studies have also shown that NDErs have an increased belief in God, or become closer to God.^{192,193} An increased closeness to God after NDEs was the conclusion in a scholarly book chapter I co-authored that reviewed 30 years of previously published literature regarding NDEs:

*For most, the result appears to be spiritual awakening. The NDE often brings with it spiritual certainty and an intense desire to conform one's life to divine will. The new relationship with what is often a personal God becomes central to the NDErs' lives.*¹⁹⁴

The NDERF study of God in near-death experiences found that the most common descriptor of God was *love*.¹⁹⁵ Love in NDEs has already been discussed, but the awareness of love seems especially strong when God is encountered. Here are examples of what NDErs said about God's love:

*The light and the presence of the entity was clearly God. It was present everywhere and a part of everything. There were no limits to the power of God. There was unconditional acceptance, forgiveness, and love.*¹⁹⁶

*The entire encounter was about God, the ultimate power of God, and God's forgiveness. The message was, "Love is the greatest power in the universe."*¹⁹⁷

*God does exist. I was aware that God is not a man or woman. God is everything as pure love energy. We are God because we are one entity.*¹⁹⁸

I could go on with vast numbers of quotes like these describing the powerful and unearthly love of God. A profound and reassuring message from near-death experiences is that God loves *everyone*.

While talking about God in near-death experiences, it is noteworthy that NDErs may become aware that there is no preferred religion. Jean learned this when her heart stopped four times as she battled for her life with toxic shock syndrome. In her NDE she asked a spiritual being directly about religion:

I found myself in a city and was told this was the City of God. I was at a water fountain along with a man dressed in a long white linen robe that was tied around his waist with a cord. He told me that I could ask any question. My first question was, 'What is the right religion?' He said, 'They all are. Each religion is a pathway trying to reach the same place.' I was shown a mountain, with each religious group trying to reach the top. A distance separated the religious groups, but all were trying to get to the same place.¹⁹⁹

Another important spiritual concept in near-death experiences is an absence of judgment. We previously discussed that judgment by other beings almost never happens during life reviews. The lack of judgment is a strong and consistent theme throughout NDEs. Typical comments about this from NDErs are:

It's not God as classically defined in religious texts. It's more a supreme energy that set everything in motion. There are no judgments cast. It's a force of pure love and acceptance.²⁰⁰

God was with me. I felt Him clearly and so deeply - He was holding me in His arms. His love was in every fiber of my being and every cell of my body. God was in front of me, behind me, beside me, and all around me. All I felt was His total acceptance of me with absolutely no judgment. He is all love; entirely love, and He showered that love on me and through me. I felt complete and whole for the first time in my entire existence. My life review seemed to happen on its own. The life review was over in the blink of an eye. I learned that we judge ourselves; God does not judge us.²⁰¹

Near-death experiencers consistently describe a *connection and unity* with God. This may be surprising to many, as this notion of God is usually not emphasized in traditional Western religions. The dictionary definition of *love* indicates that *attachment* is a defining characteristic of love.²⁰² It makes sense that God's exceptional love would manifest as an exceptional attachment. God's overwhelming love for all of us likely contributes to the unity and oneness with God so commonly expressed in NDEs:

I felt what we know as 'God' was a very alive and dynamic living force that flowed through our hearts and connected the greater universe and all of us.²⁰³

We are God. Our spirits are one. We are all parts of the whole.²⁰⁴

I now know that unconditional love and acceptance are mine. I was enlightened as to the universe and the oneness of us all. I was not aware of this possibility until my experience. Now I know the universe is one, and we all make up the supreme being.²⁰⁵

I was surrounded by God. The light is love. The light is God. We are all connected. We are all one.²⁰⁶

The most recent version of the NDERF survey explored the idea of unity and oneness in near-death experiences in general. A survey question asked, “During your experience, did you encounter any specific information / awareness that a mystical universal connection or unity/oneness either does (or does not) exist?” The survey question emphasized that it was asking about awareness of a mystical universal connection or unity/oneness occurring only *during* their NDE. 834 NDErs responded with these results:

n=834	NDErs	%
Yes	393	47.1
Uncertain	88	10.6
No	353	42.3

As with the NDERF survey question regarding God, the “or does not” part of the question was added to see if any significant percentage of NDErs encountered information that a mystical universal connection/unity/oneness does not exist. A narrative response to this question followed. As with the NDERF survey question about God, virtually all NDErs responding affirmatively indicated that they encountered information that a mystical universal connection/unity/oneness really *does* exist. Here are examples of the unity encountered in NDEs:

*I felt at one with all existence, and it was indescribably beautiful.*²⁰⁷

*I felt entirely at one with the universe, like a great light free from all suffering had absorbed me. This light was peace, understanding, acceptance, and complete tranquility. I describe coming back to life as being 'ripped back from the oneness.'*²⁰⁸

*It was evident that EVERYTHING, not just EVERYONE, is related somehow and that everything is necessarily part of the whole.*²⁰⁹

*There is only one God, and we are all part of that great soul. In all of God's realms, or in the small corner called the physical universe, there is nothing but God.*²¹⁰

*I felt a connection, a unity or oneness that we are all connected through God.*²¹¹

The unity of everyone and everything is consistently described in near-death experiences. Hundreds of examples of this unity are available on the NDERF website as supplementary material.²¹² The unity described in NDEs transcends the physical material world and seems to encompass and transcend our earthly consciousness. The remarkably high percentage of NDErs encountering this sense of unity is, in my opinion, among the most important spiritual insights from NDEs.

The consistency of multiple spiritual concepts in near-death experiences converges on the understanding the afterlife is a reality and *idyllic* in every sense of the word. Evidence from NDEs shows that we are all part of something much greater than

ourselves. The vital message from NDEs is that love, unity, and God are central aspects of the afterlife. An unimaginably glorious afterlife is the destiny for all of humanity.

Conclusion

Twelve lines of evidence for the reality of survival of human consciousness after death have been presented in this article. This evidence consistently demonstrates that near-death experiences are medically inexplicable and cannot be explained by physical brain function.

The evidence presented would be extraordinary even if near-death experiencers were fully awake when they had their experiences. But they're not. NDEs happen at a time of unconsciousness or clinical death with an absent heartbeat. Conscious and lucid experiences while unconscious should not occur. Yet NDEs do occur and are packed with multiple lines of evidence consistently pointing to an afterlife. To review, these are the twelve lines of evidence presented in this article for the reality of NDEs and an afterlife:

1. Consciousness and alertness during near-death experiences is usually *greater* than during their everyday life. This is medically inexplicable given that NDEs occur when they are unconscious or clinically dead.
2. What near-death experiencers see and hear while they are out-of-body during near-death experiences is almost always completely accurate. Out-of-body observations far from their physical body are also nearly always totally realistic. Nearly all out-of-body observations are confirmed to be accurate when later checked by the NDErs or others.
3. Supernormal sensory awareness is consistently described in near-death experiences. Normal or supernormal vision may occur in those born totally blind and in those with severe vision impairment.
4. Typical near-death experiences occur while under general anesthesia at a time that conscious and lucid experiences should not be possible.
5. When deceased loved ones are encountered in near-death experiences, they are virtually always deceased at the time of the NDEs and almost always appear in perfect health.
6. The core content of near-death experiences from all around the world is remarkably consistent. NDEs from non-Western countries are remarkably similar to Western NDEs.
7. The core content of near-death experiences in children, including very young children, are strikingly similar to the NDEs of older children and adults.
8. Life reviews in near-death experiences typically have an unearthly acceleration of consciousness. They include real events that previously occurred in the NDErs' lives, even if the events were long forgotten.

9. Near-death experiencers commonly have substantial changes in their beliefs and values as aftereffects following their NDEs. NDErs usually develop a greatly increased belief in an afterlife and decreased fear of death.
10. Near-death experiencers generally accept the reality of their NDEs. The NDERF survey found that 93.8% of NDErs believed that their experiences were definitely real.
11. Shared near-death experiences occur when two or more people have a life-threatening event simultaneously, with at least one person surviving and the other(s) permanently dying. The surviving NDEr later describes a shared experience with the permanently deceased person(s). This is significant evidence that what is described in NDEs is the initial journey of the irrevocably deceased into the afterlife.
12. The remarkably consistent spiritual content of near-death experiences is further evidence for the reality of NDEs. In describing the profoundly blissful afterlife, NDErs are consistently aware of the vital importance of love, the reality of God that transcends human understanding, and the unity of all of us.

The strength of this evidence convinces me that near-death experiences are real and there absolutely is an afterlife. I encourage each reader to consider the evidence for the reality of NDEs and the afterlife and reach your own conclusion. The convergence of multiple lines of evidence for the validity of NDE and an afterlife presented in this article builds a *far* stronger case than from only a single line of evidence. To illustrate this, suppose there existed only two lines of evidence for the reality of an afterlife. Neither line of evidence may be 100 percent convincing, but assume each line of evidence is individually 90 percent convincing. When combined, the two lines of evidence are mathematically calculated to be 99 percent convincing of the reality of an afterlife.²¹³ Given the complexity of mathematically analyzing just *two* lines of evidence, it would be far more difficult to mathematically analyze all *twelve* lines of evidence presented in this article. Fortunately, the NDERF website has a custom-designed form that automatically performs this mathematical analysis for you (www.nderf.org/afterlife). This form allows you to calculate how strongly *you* believe that an afterlife is proven by the twelve lines of evidence in this article. This form also shows you the results of all others who completed the form.

The NDERF studies presented throughout this article are the most extensive scientific investigation of near-death experiences ever reported. These investigations provide new and exceptional scientific evidence for the reality of NDEs and the afterlife. Most of the lines of evidence presented in this article are corroborated by the findings of prior scholarly near-death experience studies spanning over forty-five years. These previous investigations reinforce the remarkable results from the NDERF studies. I believe the evidence is now so strong that the survival of human consciousness after death is proven beyond a reasonable doubt.

There is still much that we can learn from the scientific study of near-death experiences. Further scholarly investigation of NDEs and other experiences that

suggest the survival of consciousness after bodily death is strongly encouraged.

Skeptic arguments *cannot* explain the remarkable consistency of the content of near-death experiences. Physical brain function cannot explain NDEs. An essential part of convincing the world that NDEs and their evidence of an afterlife is real is to address the skeptical arguments. To accomplish this, a section of the NDERF website explores skeptical views in depth.²¹⁴ Those interested in particular skeptical arguments not addressed in this article will likely find them discussed and refuted in this NDERF website section.

Near-death experiences have profound implications for science. NDEs conclusively show that human experiences suggesting an afterlife can and should be scientifically investigated. NDEs provide compelling evidence that there is far more to consciousness than is explained by our physical brain.

Near-death experiences also have important implications for religion. The great religions have always addressed a belief in an afterlife and God. The evidence from NDEs offers compelling evidence for the reality of an afterlife. Additionally, NDEs consistently point to a universe imbued with a vast and loving intelligence.

NDEs show that death is not the end but rather a transition to a magnificent afterlife. This is a profoundly inspirational message for us, our loved ones, and all of humanity.

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